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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a first-year English-as-foreign-language junior college reading course in Japan that utilized a combination of whole class instruction and cooperative learning techniques to encourage group discussion and language skill development. Students were randomly divided into groups of eight--a group which became the students' home group for the entire academic year. Most classes included both whole class instruction and cooperative learning segments. Four cooperative activities were tried. In Talking Tokens, an activity designed to encourage full and equal participation, each student takes a token from a central pile and shares information and contributes to the discussion. A Jigsaw activity divides a subject into equal parts with all students from the home group volunteering or being assigned to become experts in their piece of the puzzle and find the best way to pass on this knowledge to the rest of the group. In a group investigation activity, students divide the research responsibilities of their topic and then devise the most effective way to synthesize their findings and present it to the rest of the class. In a roundtable activity, students brainstorm out loud and write their ideas on a common tablet. They then discuss which are the best ideas, and the ones that will be presented to the rest of the class. The various cooperative learning tasks successfully helped the students analyze the stories they read and develop the competence to talk about them in the second language. (Contains 19 references.) (KFT)

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Chapter 7

ED 437 846

Reading Together

Patricia Thornton

Thoughts of reading evoke images of comfortable chairs, warm fires, and discussions of a current book at the dinner table. In this image, everyone contributes their opinions and ideas, bringing their individual life experiences into the conversation as the meaning of the book unfolds. I wondered how I could create some, if not all, of this atmosphere in the classroom. I wanted students to be engaged in reading authentic and interesting writing, to be critical thinkers, to be able to relate their reading to their own lives and experiences, and to develop a love, or at least an appreciation, for reading in English. To accomplish these goals, I decided to use a combination of whole class instruction and cooperative learning groups.

This paper will describe the setting for which this course was developed and the process of planning it. Important questions about learning (e.g., What do students do when they read?) and teaching (e.g., What can teachers do in the classroom to support and develop the processes of reading?) were addressed in the planning stages. These will be presented along with the course description and rationale for the use of cooperative learning groups to meet the chosen goals. Examples of cooperative activities used during the course will be given, and the course's effectiveness will be evaluated.

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The Setting

Class Description

This class was a first-year reading course for Japanese junior college students composed of 58 women, 18 to 19 years old, with high beginner to low intermediate levels of English as determined by TOEFL scores and informal evaluations. It met for 90-minutes, one day per week for 26 weeks. The goals of the course were to increase English vocabulary and reading skills, develop critical thinking skills, and promote a positive attitude toward reading in English.

Planning the Course

The Process of Reading

My first step in designing this course was to consider fundamental questions about reading and what good readers do. Some important questions teachers might ask about reading are "What does it mean to read?" and "What makes one student a better or more effective reader than another?" The tasks we give students to do in a reading class will be determined by our answers to these questions.

Research indicates that reading is a dynamic process (Devine, Carrell, & Eskey, 1987; Nuttall, 1982) involving the reader in constructing meaning through the interaction of information suggested by the written language and the reader's existing knowledge. As readers read, they construct meaning based on the interplay of their previous knowledge and the new concepts being presented by the author. Teachers have an effect on this process when they provide background information about culture, unfamiliar language, and styles of writing. Teachers also pose questions that allow students to focus on and think about critical sections of the text.

In reading, there are two types of processes at work, top-down and bottom-up processes. Bottom-up processes involve the decoding of symbols and assigning sounds and meaning to those symbols. In a classroom, this would include activities such as vocabulary development, pronunciation practice, and understanding prefixes or suffixes. Top-down processes involve predicting, chunking text, and reading quickly to get the main idea of a text rather than understanding every grapheme and phoneme. This process draws upon the reader's previous experiences to make meaning from the text. The interplay of these two kinds of processes is called the interactive model of reading (Dubin & Bycina, 1991, p. 197).

> According to the interactive model, the reading process works like this: First, clues to meaning are taken up from the page by the eye and then

transmitted to the brain. The brain then tries to match existing knowledge to the incoming data in order to facilitate the further processing of new information. On the basis of this previous experience, predictions are made about the content of the text, which, upon further sampling of the data, are either confirmed or revised.

Based on this theoretical foundation of reading, I searched for a book which included a variety of authentic styles of American literature and helped develop both top-down and bottom-up reading processes. The book I finally chose, called *Life, Language and Literature* by Fellag (1993), meets these criteria. It contains a collection of American short stories and poems with reading skills activities, vocabulary-building exercises, and application questions.

I planned for the course to include whole class instruction for introducing cultural information; whole group discussion for sharing individual and small group experiences or questions/answers about the story; silent reading, and questions for homework to prepare for classroom activities; and cooperative learning groups to give students more opportunities to use the language in the stories, to help each other understand vocabulary, and to share with each other their personal interpretations.

Since this was the first time I had used cooperative learning methods at the college level in Japan, I went back to the literature about the characteristics of cooperative learning to gain a better understanding of its application in this setting. I was curious to learn how other college educators were using this methodology and their thoughts about its success. Below is a summary of the information I found.

Principles of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is an instructional approach in which students work together in small groups to accomplish a common learning goal.

Cooperative learning is not the same as traditional group work.The characteristics of cooperative groups that set them apart from traditional groups are the carefully structured tasks and the interdependence of all members of the group. A good cooperative task will demand full participation because of its structure either in assigning roles to the participants or making the success of the group dependent on all members. Individual and group accountability are also important.

There have been many studies comparing cooperative learning techniques with other approaches (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Slavin, 1990).

In analyzing the effectiveness of cooperative learning in college settings, Cuseo (1994, pp. 3-5) identified eight reasons for its success. The remainder of this section are arrounced around Cuseo's eight reasons. Cooperative learning:

1) actively involves students in the learning process
2) allows for effective monitoring of student comprehension
3) effectively establishes a "model-practice-feedback loop"
4) implements effective principles of human information-processing and memory
5) creates multiple opportunities for peer learning and peer teaching
6) implements effective principles of human motivation
7) fosters independent, self-directed learning
8) involves principles known to promote student retention (persistence to graduation)

All of the above theory and application is in reference to native speakers of a language. At the time, there was little research in EFL, but more recently a few projects have been described (See Bejarano, 1987; Deen, 1991; Lie, 1992; McGuire, 1992; Szostek, 1994). To answer the question myself, I considered each of Cuseo's (1994) reasons listed above in relation to foreign language teaching and learning.

If we apply the above characteristics and results of cooperative learning to the foreign language classroom, we find that cooperative learning methodology and language teaching/learning are very compatible. Skills such as communication, thoughtful processing of information, and application of new learning to old are encouraged. It also provides students with a smaller audience to try out ideas and language, making it a less anxiety-producing prospect for many students. Working in small groups which require full participation and interdependence enhances the opportunities students have to practice and use all modes of language. Let's consider each of Cuseo's (1994) reasons for success in the context of language learning, especially in regards to reading:

1) Cooperative Learning (CL) actively involves students in the learning process.
The student-centered cooperative learning method requires students to become actively engaged in a learning process that encourages them to personally reflect on course material and relate it to their existing knowledge structures. In reading, this provides an ideal structure for students to engage in top-down processing that is required for full comprehension. In addition, cooperative learning requires students to articulate and justify their ideas as they communicate with their peers.

2) CL allows for effective monitoring of student comprehension.
When students are working in cooperative groups, the instructor has better access to students' thoughts and perceptions than through lecture or reading lab models. By circulating among the groups, the teacher can observe and interact with a greater number of students. Working in small groups, students are more likely to engage the teacher in conversation because the interaction is less for-

mal and there is a smaller audience. The questioning student, therefore, has less to risk in trying out new language or checking for comprehension.

3) CL effectively establishes a "model-practice-feedback loop."
Students have more opportunities to practice language in all forms and to practice the skills emphasized in the reading class. They can utilize the strengths of other group members to ensure correct comprehension.

4) CL implements effective principles of human information-processing and memory.
According to Cuseo (1994, p. 3):

> Cooperative learning procedures effectively promote student memory of instructor-presented material in three ways: (a) by providing students with an opportunity to rehearse and consolidate recently processed information, (b) by providing students with immediate feedback regarding comprehension, and (c) by providing a change of routine from the lecture method during the class period.

In language learning, the opportunities to rehearse and get feedback are essential. In the reading class, when new vocabulary words are presented to the whole class, a cooperative task might follow in which students are required to work together to learn the words and be able to use them correctly to form complex sentences. A structure such as Kagan's (1989) Co-op Cards could be used.

5) CL creates multiple opportunities for peer learning and peer teaching.
Cooperative learning structures help students learn to value each other as resources for learning. Vygotsky (1962) hypothesized that peer teaching/learning is effective because the two students are usually at similar stages of cognitive development and have similar levels of cultural experience in respect to the concept being learned. In a reading class, as background information is explained to give a framework for understanding a particular reading passage, cooperative groups can develop more appropriate comparisons or examples that will assist learners in comprehending. In foreign language classes where there are few native-speakers, this teaching methodology can help students develop a more positive attitude toward other students and nonnative speakers as potential models for language learning.

6) CL implements effective principles of human motivation.
In Japan, when asked a direct question by an instructor, an individual student will often turn to her neighbors and seek group advice before venturing forth with a response. The idea of group as well as individual accountability seems

natural in the Japanese context. Students enjoy working together and feel more relaxed representing a group rather than themselves. Students are therefore more motivated to participate if they are working together. Also, research has shown that more frequent feedback increases motivation (Cuseo, 1994). Cooperative groups provide this feedback from peers and the instructor as he/she interacts with the groups.

7) CL fosters independent, self-directed learning.
In studying the characteristics of good language learners, Naiman, Frolich, Stern, and Todesco (1978) found that the most successful language learning strategies are connected with assuming responsibility for one's own learning. Students should be trained to create learning opportunities and to take responsibility for at least some of their learning (Sheerin, 1991). Cooperative learning allows students to work independently of an instructor within structured contexts, encouraging them to rely on their own resources and to take personal responsibility for their own learning.

8) CL involves principles known to promote student retention (persistence to graduation).
Few students drop out of college in Japan, but absenteeism is a significant issue. Cuseo (1994) indicated that American college students more often remained in school when they had opportunities to work regularly in small groups. That environment promotes social involvement, integration, and bonding among students. Though unproved, it seems the same reasoning can be applied to the problem of absenteeism in classes in Japan. If students feel obligated to their group, they may be more inclined to attend class and be in contact with group members outside of class, increasing the likelihood of completed assignments and projects.

Application of Cooperative Learning in a Foreign Language Reading Class in Japan

Forming the Cooperative Groups
During the first week of classes, students were randomly assigned to a group of eight. This became their "home group." Students remained in these home groups for the entire year. Other groupings were also used in "Jigsaw" activities (see below). Within the home group, pairs of students would sometimes work together. The intent of the cooperative groups was to give all students an opportunity to participate in discussion and ensure comprehension. Most class periods included both whole class instruction and cooperative tasks. The percent-

age of class time devoted to each type of activity varied based on the material under discussion at a given time. The cooperative tasks included Jigsaw activities, Co-op Cards, and projects, which are described below.

Four Sample Cooperative Activities

1. Talking Tokens (Kagan, 1989): To encourage full and equal participation, each team or group member shares information and contributes to a discussion after placing a talking chip (e.g., a pen, checker, playing card, etc.) in the center of the group. After all students have contributed in random order, they retrieve their chips to begin another round.

At the beginning of the reading course, I wanted students to think about what literature is and about examples they had already encountered and liked. Using a modified form of Talking Tokens facilitated students' participation. They were asked to read a two-paragraph discussion in the introduction of the text about literature and then answer the questions below, following the group directions.

Directions:
Each member of your group was given a playing card. That card represents you. Place the card in the center of the desks. There are three questions your group must answer. When you give an answer or tell your opinion, pick up your card. You cannot speak again until everyone has picked up her card. When all the cards are gone, you can begin again by placing the cards in the center of the table. This will help everyone to have a chance to speak and be an important part of your group. Write answers for yourselves and for your group members on your paper. At the end of class, I will ask a member of each group to report about their group's answers.

1. What is literature?
2. Think of a writer from Japan who appeals to you. Why do you like him or her? What subjects do his or her stories deal with? Are his or her stories relevant to life in Japan today? Share your ideas with the group.
3. What American writers have you heard of? Have you read any American literature? If so, think of one story you know and explain to your group what that story tells you about American life.

Talking Tokens works well as an icebreaker for new groups. There is a structure that encourages even reluctant students to participate. In a culture like Japan where volunteering is difficult, this gives students a less awkward way of participating. There is also built-in individual accountability since all students must be prepared to give the report at the end.

II. Jigsaw (Aronson, Blaney, Sikes, & Snapp, 1978): There are several types of Jigsaw activities. In this version, the instructor divides an assignment or topic into equal parts with all students from each home group volunteering or being assigned to become "experts" on one of the parts. Expert groups then work together to master their part of the assignment and also to find the best way to help others learn it. All experts then go back to their home groups where they teach the other group members.

In the reading course I used Jigsaw in two ways. Sometimes students were given parts of the story to read and teach in a Jigsaw pattern, and other times they were assigned comprehension or application questions to answer in Jigsaw groups. Since time is always a crucial factor, this can be an efficient way to deal with large amounts of text or questions.

Jigsawing can be difficult for students because it involves summarizing and reporting. It also involves active listening by those receiving the report. As a language learning task, I think it is very good because it helps students develop reading, speaking, and listening skills. It is important for the teacher to select appropriate amounts of text based on readiblilty and students' levels of English language ability.

III. Group Investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1976): In six successive stages, cooperative groups investigate subtopics of a general topic chosen by the teacher, plan what they will study, how they will divide the research responsibilities, and how they will synthesize and summarize their findings for the class. Reports, presentations, and individual learning are evaluated by the teacher. Students are encouraged to use audio-visual material, dramatizations, and other creative ways to present the information they gathered.

One example of group investigation in the reading class was the investigation of characters in the story, *The Luck of Roaring Camp* (Harte, 1993). The home groups were asked to choose two favorite characters from the story and then by drawing numbers, each group chose the character they would investigate. The assignment was to develop a presentation to introduce that character to the other students. They could use drama, pictures, and props such as clothing to help the other students understand as much as possible about that character. They were also asked to identify all parts of the text that included their character, and to choose the passage that most clearly helped them understand that person. Finally, they wrote a "self-introduction" of the character. Evaluation was based on the group presentation and the written report. An overall group grade was given as well as individual grades based on the individual's specific tasks within the larger tasks. An evaluation sheet was also completed by the group which listed all the tasks done by the students and which members participated in each task. This activity spanned three weeks and most of it

was completed outside of class. Every group was required to meet with me at lunch time one day during those three weeks to discuss their progress.

IV. Roundtable: In this brainstorming technique students in a learning team write in turn on a single pad of paper, stating their ideas aloud as they write. As the tablet circulates, more and more information is added until various aspects of a topic are explored.

I used a modified form of this activity to help students develop supporting quotes from a text. The mid-term writing project for this course was to write a character analysis, choosing one main trait to describe and support with specific examples and quotations from the story. To help students prepare for this assignment I first had groups brainstorm together about three characters from different stories. They were asked to choose one descriptive word and locate three supporting quotes or examples from the story, listing the page number. One section of the form is below, with one group's responses:

White Silence

In *White Silence*, Mason was a (strict) man.
(Add one word to describe the narrator's personality.)

Support:	Place:
"Slash! The whip fell among the dogs savagely."	p. 9
"You must go on . . . You must pull on . . . . ."	p. 12
"Send Ruth here. I want to say good-bye and tell her that she must think of the boy and not wait until I'm dead . . ."	p. 12

The groups decided together the one word to describe each of the three characters. Then every student was required to fill in at least one supporting statement, read it aloud, and then pass the paper on to the next student. If the group disagreed with a student's statement, they could express their opinion and the student looked for a new supporting statement or defended their original choice. By the end of the session, almost every student understood the concept of supporting an opinion statement from the text. This is a difficult concept to teach, but in the mid-term papers all but a very few students demonstrated their understanding of this concept.

Observations and Comments about Course Effectiveness

Using a combination of traditional instructional methods and cooperative learning groups was an effective way to help students understand and analyze a challenging text. Students were not only reading in English, but also writing and

discussing. Attendance was good in this class, but when students were absent, the home groups gave them an easy way to get missed information.

There were some negative aspects of this course. The home groups were too large. I chose group sizes of eight students because of the number of students enrolled in the class and the room size. In retrospect, the large size enabled a few students to have a "free ride" on less-structured activities. In a similar situation in the future, I would limit the groups to four members, creating larger groups when needed by combining two groups.

On the course evaluation, students were asked if they enjoyed working in groups. If they answered no, they were asked to give a reason. 79% of students gave an unqualified "yes" response. Those who answered "no" and gave explanations listed comments and reasons such as, "It was difficult to talk," "My group wasn't good," and "I like to work alone."

Did this course improve students' reading abilities? That is a difficult question to answer. Most students (95%) earned passing grades in the course based on class participation, group assignment grades, individual writing assignments, and a final exam.

Conclusion

Considering the various cooperative learning tasks described earlier in this paper, all of them, in my opinion, were successful in helping students prepare for and analyze the stories they read. The more structured tasks such as Co-op Cards were more successful in getting every student involved. Less structured tasks, however, gave students the opportunities to learn more about managing their own learning. In the future I would continue to use a mixture of types of cooperative learning activities.

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